



MINUTES
OCONEE COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING
Public Workshop Meeting
with School District of Oconee County [SDOC]
September 16, 2008

MEMBERS, OCONEE COUNTY COUNCIL

Mr. George Blanchard District I, Chairman
Mr. Thomas S. Crumpton, Jr., District II
Mr. Mario Suarez, District III
Mr. Marion E. Lyles, District IV
Mr. H. Frank Ables, Jr., District V

Oconee County Council met on Tuesday, September 16, 2008 at 5:30 PM in Council Chambers, 415 South Pine Street, Walhalla, SC with all Council Members [except Mr. Suarez], County Administrator Dale K. Surrent and Elizabeth G. Hulse, Clerk to Council present.

Press:

Members of the press notified (via mail): Keowee Courier, Westminster News, Daily Journal, Anderson Independent, WGOG Radio, WYFF TV, WLOS TV WSPA TV & WSNW Radio.

Member of the press present: Dick Mangrum-WGOG, Ray Chandler-Anderson Independent & Brett McLaughlin-Daily Journal.

Call to Order:

Chairman Blanchard welcomed the SDOC Board and members of the administration and called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

Mr. Blanchard recognized the SDOC Board members: Harry B. Mays, Jr., Chairman, Ken Poston, Vice Chairman, Andy Inabinet, Jerry Lee and Denise McCormick. In addition he recognized SDOC staff to include: Dr. Michael Lucas, Superintendent, Dr. Michael Thorsland, Gloria Moore, Diane England and Ernestine Williams.

SDOC Presentation to Council regarding Limited Fiscal Autonomy:

Mr. Mays thanked Council for this workshop meeting and turned the floor over to Dr. Lucas to outline the school districts request. Dr. Lucas provided a handout [filed with these minutes] to each Council member which outlined the current structure, fiscal responsibilities in other South Carolina school districts, and the pros and cons of limited fiscal autonomy. In addition, he discussed how Act 388 by the South Carolina legislature in 2006 will limit all local governments' ability to increase property taxes. Dr. Lucas clearly stated that it is not the intention of the Board to raise taxes and that through limited fiscal autonomy that the SDOC can continue to maintain high standards without tax increases. It was noted that approximately 70% of the overall Oconee County budget is dedicated to the SDOC and that of that 70% that Council only has control over approximately 3%. In closing he stated that as the SDOC Board is an elected body that they should have autonomy and responsibility to the citizens for money spent for the school system.

Mr. Blanchard thanked Dr. Lucas and opened the floor for discussion between Council, the SDOC Board and school administration.

Mr. Blanchard noted that he has discussed this issue with both Senator Thomas Alexander and Representative Bill Whitmire; stating that they were not “warm” to the idea. In addition he noted that he had within the last year discussed this also with Representative Bill Sandifer who at that time was opposed to fiscal autonomy for the SDOC. Mr. Blanchard noted that he recently attended as a member a meeting of the South Carolina Association of Counties Finance Steering Committee. He stated that approximately one half of this meeting was devoted to this issue and Act 388 along with the CPI formulation.

Discussion occurred regarding Act 388 and how calculations will be made. Dr. Lucas noted that Oconee County is ranked #9 in wealth in South Carolina. Mr. Blanchard noted that wealth and income are two different things and that if we are ranked based on average income we would fall much lower on the listing.

Mr. Ken Poston polled Council on their feeling regarding autonomy. Mr. Crumpton stated that he was opposed and that their efforts should be directed toward the delegation as they have the power to change the process. Dr. Lucas noted that it was not the intent of this meeting to obtain a decision; it was intended to keep Council in the loop in the discussion. Mr. Ables noted that feedback from voters in his district is that they do not want another taxing authority in Oconee County. Mr. Lyles noted that as the SDOC Board is elected that it might be appropriate for the authority to be theirs; however, discussion needs to be directed toward the public to provide information. Mr. Mays noted that it was the hope of the Board to obtain Council’s approval for fiscal autonomy. He noted that they are planning public education regarding this issue and will discuss this matter in greater detail with the delegation at a planned breakfast next week. Discussion followed.

Mr. Surrett noted that he is hearing a lot from colleagues throughout the state about the status of Maintenance of Effort and “book bag funding” [which is based on a ratio and the number of students]. He cautioned Council regarding taking any position until additional information can be received from Columbia regarding implementation of Act 388 and other issues discussed.

Each of the SDOC Board spoke briefly and thanked Council for the meeting and the open discussion that took place.

In closing Mr. Blanchard noted that it was unlikely to get a formal letter from Council either in support of or opposed to fiscal autonomy. He noted that the workshop was very beneficial and educational. Mr. Blanchard along with Council were very supportive of public education regarding this issue so that the public can help decide who is best to be a good “watch dog” over the SDOC budget and expenditures. Mr. Blanchard stated that in an effort for the Council and the SDOC to be fiscally responsible that future cooperative efforts might be effective such as cooping for procurement and potentially vehicle maintenance.

Lastly, Mr. Blanchard stated that after the new Council members are seated in January that he would like to see the two groups meet and review meeting schedules so that citizens can attend both without time/day conflict.

Adjourn:

Mr. Blanchard adjourned the meeting at 6:28 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

Elizabeth G. Hulse
Clerk to Council